



County of Los Angeles CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICE

Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration
500 West Temple Street, Room 713, Los Angeles, California 90012
(213) 974-1101
<http://ceo.lacounty.gov>

WILLIAM T FUJIOKA
Chief Executive Officer

July 18, 2014

To: Supervisor Don Knabe, Chairman
Supervisor Gloria Molina
Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas
Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky
Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich

From: William T Fujioka
Chief Executive Officer

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "W. Fujioka", is written over the printed name of the Chief Executive Officer.

Board of Supervisors
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Fifth District

REPORT BACK ON THE ELIMINATION OF DELAYS IN TRANSFERRING VETERAN DECEDENTS AND THE TRANSFER OF THE COUNTY MORGUE, CEMETARY AND CREMETORY FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES TO THE DEPARTMENT OF MEDICAL EXAMINER-CORONER (ITEM NO. 27-A, AGENDA OF MAY 27, 2014)

On May 27, 2014, the Board instructed the Chief Executive Officer, with the Departments of Medical Examiner-Coroner (DMEC) and Health Services (DHS) to report back on the feasibility and fiscal impact of transferring the functions of the County morgue, as well as operation and maintenance of the County cemetery and crematorium from DHS to DMEC in 30 days.

Background Information

The function of cremating indigent decedents was assigned to DHS in the mid 1910's when the Department was named the Department of Hospitals and Charity and has been performed by LAC+USC Medical Center (LAC+USC) as a matter of historical assignment ever since. The crematory currently operated by DHS is the only active crematory operated by a County in Southern California and is managed by the Decedent Affairs Office (DAO) at LAC+USC.

The DAO manages both hospital deaths at LAC+USC and outside deaths of indigent and unclaimed persons throughout the County. Unclaimed and indigent decedents that do not qualify for investigation by DMEC are reported to DAO by hospitals, nursing and convalescent homes, mortuaries and law enforcement agencies. The remains are taken to LAC+USC by DAO mortuary attendants and stored while the Public Administrator (PA), a division of the Treasurer-Tax Collector, determines whether the

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next of kin can be located and/or if there are sufficient assets in the decedent's estate to pay for burial by a private mortuary. If the decedent's estate does not have sufficient assets and the next of kin do not claim the remains, respond to notifications or report that they are financially unable to provide burial services, the decedent is declared indigent and the County takes responsibility for cremating the decedent at no charge. In some cases, the PA's identification process can take up to 30 days or more, leaving the decedent in the County's Morgue until all notifications and searches have been exhausted. Once completed, the unclaimed indigent decedent is then cremated and buried at the County cemetery.

Determining Eligibility for Veteran Burial

If military service is confirmed or suspected, DAO contacts the federal Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) National Cemetery Scheduling Office (NCSO) to verify eligibility for burial in a VA national cemetery. If NCSO confirms eligibility, it issues a confirmation number and sends verification of military service back to DAO. DAO notifies the County Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (MVA) Burial Coordinator that an indigent decedent is eligible for burial and sends verification of indigence, verification of military service, and the burial eligibility confirmation number to the MVA Burial Coordinator for review. If the documentation is in order, the MVA Burial Coordinator releases the documentation to the private mortuary.

The private mortuary reviews the documentation, and refers any questions about indigent status to DAO. If the veteran's remains are accepted for services, the private mortuary coordinates with DAO and NCSO to arrange for collection and transfer of the veteran's remains, and burial at a VA national cemetery, typically the Riverside National Cemetery (RNC). Once NCSO confirms that RNC has made the necessary preparations, it notifies the private mortuary, which then collects the remains from DAO and transports them to RNC for burial. The private mortuary is compensated between \$250 and \$300, depending on the veteran's service record, compared to the \$2,800 actual cost incurred for these services.

Delays in Transfers

Typically, the County Morgue has an average of 20-25 indigent veteran decedents per month awaiting burial. Over the last year, the total number of indigent veteran decedents awaiting burial on the average rose to 30-35 per month. This overall increase was primarily due to several factors: 1) the private mortuary that was solely responsible for handling the veteran's remains had a change in staff assigned to oversee this program. Along with this change, new procedures were implemented that rejected cases where the veteran's indigent status was based on the veteran's estate

not having sufficient assets and next of kin that do not respond to notifications or report that they are financially unable to provide burial services. Because the next of kin were listed, the private mortuary declared that the veterans were not actually indigent and therefore were not eligible for services. The private mortuary then picked up only those veterans where no next of kin were listed. Initially, the DAO and MVA were unaware of this policy change and as a result the number of indigent veterans in the County Morgue awaiting burial began to increase; 2) the MVA Burial Coordinator retired from County service during this time and, as a result, the normal notification process that occurred between DAO and MVA lapsed; and 3) currently, there is only one mortuary responsible for picking up the indigent veteran remains, casketing those remains and transferring them to RNC for burial. This leaves the County without a contingency plan when the need arises.

Immediate Corrective Actions

To prevent future delays, MVA and DAO have instituted the following policy and procedural changes:

1. MVA has revised its tracking processes and will coordinate with DAO on a weekly basis to ensure that all cases are monitored and managed on a timely basis.
2. MVA has enlisted four additional mortuaries that will voluntarily coordinate the transfer and burial of all veteran's remains, regardless if next of kin are listed. Services are provided on an as-needed basis, and are subject to each mortuary's availability. The existing mortuary will also continue to provide services based on its revised policy.

Consideration of Transfer of the County Morgue, Cemetery and Crematory

County Counsel indicates that the transfer of the County Morgue, cemetery, and crematory from DHS to DMEC is legally permissible if several changes to the County Code are approved by the Board.

DHS, DMEC and CEO will be meeting to complete a fiscal review and assessment of these functions and will report back in Supplemental Changes with preliminary recommendations for the Board's consideration.

Should you have any questions or need additional information, your staff may contact Georgia Mattera, Public Safety, at (213) 893-2374.

Each Supervisor
July 18, 2014
Page 4

WTF: GAM:SW
MI:cc

c: Executive Office, Board of Supervisors
County Counsel
Health Services
Medical Examiner-Coroner
Military and Veterans Affairs

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COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES

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